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Multi-Domain Operations, bad for civil-military relations?

By [George Fust](#) | 08 August 2019

Is it possible that the U.S. military's newest warfighting concept is bad for civil-military relations? The current lexicon for this new concept is multi-domain operations, or simply MDO. For an in-depth discussion of this concept refer to a recent War On The Rocks article, "[A Sailor's Take on Multi-Domain Operations](#)" or [The U.S. Army in Multi-Domain Operations 2028](#). The latter document suggests:

“...our nation's adversaries seek to achieve their strategic aims, short of conflict, by the use of *layered stand-off* in the political, military and economic realms to separate the U.S. from our partners. Should conflict come, they will employ *multiple layers of stand-off* in *all domains--land, sea, air, space and cyberspace--*to separate U.S. forces and our allies in time, space, and function in order to defeat us.”

To counter this threat the military seeks to build the force around three core tenets: *Calibrated force posture*, *Multi-domain formations*, and *Convergence*. The theme that joins the three tenets is the integration, access, and employment of capabilities “across all domains.” The shift for the military to operate in all domains is a first for U.S. military doctrine. It also establishes a dangerous precedent. If the military has formally adopted MDO, which it appears they have, they should understand its full impact beyond military operations. One such category of concern is the field of civil-military relations.

The bedrock of U.S. civil-military relations is the professionalism inculcated into the force. [Samuel Huntington](#) theorized the U.S. model as one of objective control. In short, objective control is achieved with an apolitical, professional force that executes the directives of the legitimate state authority. Military officers swear an oath to the Constitution, which enumerates the powers of Commander-in-Chief to the President. Therefore, the U.S. military avoids partisanship while carrying out the orders of the executive branch with oversight from the Legislative branch. This is the U.S. model of civil-military relations. Multi-domain operations threaten this delicate balance because it formalizes the military as an actor in the political sphere.

A better way to understand this concept is to employ a hypothetical scenario. Imagine a situation whereby the President accuses a U.S.-based news organization of being part of an adversaries' information operation. In accordance with MDO doctrine, the military can and should be leveraged to counter this threat. The Army's [operating concept](#) suggests “rapid and continuous integration of capabilities in all domains...to overmatch the enemy.” Information operations includes “social media, false narratives, [and] cyber-attacks.” Thus, the commander-in-chief can leverage his military to “defeat” the news organization or at least run counter information messaging. This is problematic. What prevents the President from abusing this control and offensive capability for his own political gain? The President could become a tyrant without a free press to serve as watchdog. The military would subsequently be viewed by the citizenry as a political arm to the administration. More than that, they may be viewed as a threat to liberty itself.

Any expansion of the military into a perceived political sphere is dangerous. Eventually the military will be unable to avoid partisan criticism. Despite any effort by the military to develop controls and mechanisms to prevent abuse, the damage will be done. It is also impossible to prevent a President from directly crediting the military with preventing foreign meddling “because they like him” personally. The military cannot be drawn into a debate that has any semblance of partisanship. Military credibility relies on its non-partisan reputation.

The current environment is an opportunity to redefine the roles of national security. Other executive departments and agencies should take the lead on defense within the political domain to prevent damage to civil-military relations. MDO is a sizeable transition for the Department of Defense into the nontraditional roles of the military. This can only result in higher civil-military interactions in the negative. The military must continue to focus on doing a few things well. A lack of focus on clear missions and roles is debilitating for a military. Ultimately, the concept of multi-domain operations attempts to serve as a single solution to a complex operational environment. It does not adequately take in account the damage that will occur to civil-military relations.

Charles Dunlap famously outlined in “[The Origins of the Military Coup of 2012](#)” the danger of allowing a military force to self-assign roles or have poorly thought out roles assigned by civilians. The danger is derived from the possibility of new roles that are internally focused, and subsequently political in nature. MDO has the potential to meet this criterion with its explicit focus on defending the political domain. Objective control is not possible when the military is viewed as a partisan body. MDO may well turn out to be a pyrrhic victory if it is not reimagined through a civil-military lens.